

March 8, 2010

The Honorable Gary Locke
Secretary
Department of Commerce
1401 Constitution Ave., NW
Washington, DC 20230

Dear Secretary Locke:

I am writing to not only express my continuing support for moving the National Oceanographic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA) Marine Operations Center - Pacific (MOC-P) to Newport, Oregon, but to bring to your attention new concerns about environmental problems at the Port of Bellingham, which is being promoted as a practicable alternative to Newport.

As you know, Newport's application was the top-ranked bid in the non-political process NOAA used in seeking a new location for its Pacific fleet. The Newport bid prevailed because it won on both financial and technical requirements. In other words, Newport offered the lowest cost to taxpayers and the most functional location for NOAA's Pacific operations. However, the Government Accountability Office's decision on a protest filed by the Port of Bellingham has allowed some of my colleagues the opportunity to further promote the Bellingham site.

What has been missing from discussions about the Bellingham site is that it is surrounded by myriad environmental problems and hazards. I believe this extensive environmental contamination would prevent it from being a practicable alternative and could limit the ability of the MOC-P to function properly and compromise the health and safety of the NOAA employees who would be located there.

While environmental cleanup problems are common at older ports, Bellingham has an extraordinary number of hazards to deal with. No less than 12 different Washington State Department of Ecology cleanup sites are located on Bellingham Bay (see attached map). Several are in close proximity to where the Port of Bellingham wants to relocate MOC-P. The Whatcom Waterway, which would likely be used by the NOAA fleet, has had historic discharges of mercury and, according to the state, contains more than 500,000 cubic yards of contaminated sludge and sediment. Clean up of this has not even begun and will eventually require an investment of \$44 million over six years.

Another site, referred to as the Georgia-Pacific West property, is immediately adjacent to the proposed MOC-P site and contains a variety of toxic chemicals. An assessment of this site has yet to be completed, meaning that efforts to clean up the site could continue for decades.

Lastly, the R.G. Haley site, which is located immediately south of the proposed MOC-P site, is contaminated with pentachlorophenol (PCP), a highly toxic substance responsible for numerous health problems. Additionally, an Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) Superfund site (the Oeser Company site) lies within a mile of where the Port of Bellingham wants to put the NOAA fleet. This site has not been fully cleaned up, and in fact EPA is just beginning the planning process for cleaning up chemical runoff into a nearby creek.

With this list of disturbing problems, along with other factors related to the Port of Bellingham's original proposal, it becomes clear that Bellingham is not a practicable alternative to Newport for either environmental or financial reasons.

I do not believe the environmental hazards within the Port of Bellingham were taken into full consideration in the original NOAA decision-making process. In its review of the proposals, NOAA considered the environmental conditions of the sites under consideration, but did not note the troubling environmental conditions that surround the proposed Bellingham site. When these problem are are taken into account, however, it makes NOAA's selection of Newport look that much better.

I firmly believe the environmental conditions of the Port of Bellingham are relevant to NOAA's analysis of practicable alternatives. I urge you to now take the environmental quality of the Bellingham site into consideration as you address GAO's decision.

Thank you again for your continued support in moving the MOC-P to Newport and for continuing planned work to make that move possible. If there is anything I can do to help NOAA and the Department of Commerce defend its decision in the future, please do not hesitate to ask. I look forward to working with you in the future.

Sincerely,



Ron Wyden
U.S. Senator